

American Government
Baldwin County High School
Bay Minette, Alabama

This Course will be using *Magruder's American Government (2005 Edition)* as the major source for this senior-level high school course.

This first Keynote Presentation covers Unit I, Ch I, Section I

Government and the State
Part A

1. What is *Government*?

Government is an institution by which a human society sets certain rules and policies, and enforces them. In short, government sets and enforces laws and administers policies within that society.

2. Is government a force for good?

Sometimes it is; sometimes it is not. To some extent, a good government is in the eye of the beholder, and particularly, the time in which one beholds it.

Throughout the history of humanity, governments have done things that most of us today would regard as bad, or even evil. For example, some governments have enslaved entire peoples, conducted wars of extermination, and denied liberty to their own people.

But, some governments have also freed slaves, conducted wars of liberation, and granted greater liberties to their own people.

In short, most scholars would agree that governments have done good things, but unfortunately, have also done horrible things.

3. Do all societies have governments?

It does seem that wherever there is a group of people (beyond that of a small family) of noteworthy size living in close proximity to one another, then you will likely find some form of government ruling over them.

4. Is this true even in primitive tribal societies?

Yes, it is true for the most part.

But keep in mind that a tribal “government” might reside in the hands of a tribal elder, or just the strongest clique in a small society. The government (or state), in such cases, will not be on par with the large and complex institutions that govern nations like the United States, France, or China.

Just keep in mind that, wherever you find communities larger than an immediate family, you will likely find some type of government ruling over them. There might be some exceptions here or there, but those are the exceptions that prove the rule.

5. OK, if government is a common institution found in almost all human communities, then what are some of the basic activities of modern governments in advanced societies?

Almost all modern governments make laws of the “**thou shall not**” variety. For example, governments routinely enact and enforce laws **forbidding** such actions as **theft, assault, arson, murder, fraud**, etc. Such laws are usually designed to create a safe and orderly environment in which people can live. In short, governments commonly carry out **police powers** in that society.

Keep this in mind: Sometimes even the most evil governments (e.g. Nazi Germany) will try to maintain some degree of public safety and public order. Sadly, such governments will also commit horrible crimes against people who are not favored by that government.

Modern governments often create laws and policies that provide certain services for the people in that society. Governments often create and maintain things like **public roads, water reservoirs, public schools, sanitation programs, healthcare services, fire departments**, etc.

Governments also establish and maintain **military forces** for the purposes of **national defense** and the larger enforcement of the government’s **foreign policy**. Some governments maintain large military forces while others do not.

6. What is another key power of government?

Governments have the authority and ability to **tax** members of society so that the government will have the resources to carry out its other functions, whether good or bad. In modern societies, **taxes** are often **monetary taxes**. But in some societies in the past, **taxes** sometimes were things like a portion of a crop that had to be given to the government.

7. So far, we've largely covered that “what is” of government, but exactly “who is” the government?

First, the government essentially is those people who make rules and policies, and who enforce and administer those rules and policies.

Second, the government is made up of those people with the **authority** to carry out those activities of a particular government, whether for good or for ill.

8. What is power, in the context of governing?

According to *Magruder's*, “power is the ability to command or prevent action, the ability to achieve a desired end.”

9. According to *Magruder's*, those things a government decides to are known as what?

Public policies

10. According to guys like Montesquieu (a French political philosopher) what are the three basic types of governmental power?

Legislative Power: The authority to make law and public policy

Executive Power: The authority to enforce and carry out law and policy

Judicial Power: The authority to interpret law, mediate conflicts, and implement some sense of justice

11. What is a *Constitution*?

A constitution is a foundational body of laws, customs, and/or charters that creates the framework in which a society will be governed. Some constitutions (like that of the United States) are written down. Great Britain, however, has something of an unwritten constitution that is an amalgam of law, custom, tradition, and precedent.

Please remember: Historically, constitutional government is a fairly new concept.

12. What is a good practical definition of *politics*?

Basically politics is the **struggle** for status, authority, and/or influence.

If someone seeks to become the President of the United States, then that struggle for status and authority is behavior that is **political**.

Politics and political behavior may often be very limited in scope. For example, if a citizen of Bay Minette, Alabama seeks to persuade the local government to change the speed limit on a city street, then the **effort/struggle** to change government policy is **political behavior**, and thus **politics**.

In and of itself, **politics** is neither good nor bad. Political behavior can be directed in good and noble directions. Sadly, political behavior can also be directed in ways that are bad, and even evil.

13. What is the *State*?

First, it is **not** exactly the same thing as **government**. And don't confuse the "state" in this context to be exactly the same thing as the "State" of Alabama.

OK...that's what it is not. Now let's turn to what it is. Basically a **state** is an organized political society with a **population** (the people), a **territory** (an area with some sort of boundaries), a **government**, and **sovereignty**. Such a political society is truly a *state* when it does not have to submit to another government.

For example, **France** is a **state** because it is a political society with a **population**, **territory**, **government**, and true **sovereignty** in that it does not submit to an outside political society.

True states often cooperate with one another, even agreeing to be obligated to one another via a **treaty** or some other agreement. But in these treaties they do not give up sovereignty.

Bay Minette is **not** a state because it does **not** possess **sovereignty**. Bay Minette answers to the governments of Baldwin County, Alabama, and the United States.

Alabama is **not** really a true *state* because it submits to the government of the United States. **Alabama**, in short, is **not** sovereign.

14. In terms of a state, what is a population?

Basically it's the people who have a formal and vesting relationship with the state. In some states the people are considered **citizens**. Other states might classify the population as **subjects**. Other states (particularly states prior to the 20th century) might define some of the population as the **nobility**, some of the population as **serfs** and/or **slaves**.

Even today, some states have populations with high degrees of rights and freedoms. Nations like the **United States**, **Canada**, **France**, and **Great Britain** have populations who possess a great deal of **individual freedom** and **civil rights**.

Other nations, however, have populations who possess few liberties and rights. **North Korea** is an example of a modern nation in which its people are dominated and controlled by the government.

15. In terms of a state, what is a *territory*?

For the most part, human beings reside at or near the surface of planet Earth, with only a few exceptions.

Yes, there are currently some astronauts living on an orbiting space station, and at any given moment, there are thousands of people at sea in international waters, or are in international airspace.

But for the most part today, 99% of humanity is living on or living near dry land. Currently, most of the earth's dry land has been carved up into territories by governments.

A state's territory is that land and water where a government's authority is in effect. A true state has **sovereignty** in a given area, and does not answer to another government in that area.

In our age, state territories usually have well-defined **boundaries** (borders) that are identified on maps, etc.

16. In terms of a state, what is *sovereignty*?

Sovereignty is ability and prerogative to rule a **population** and **territory** via the institution of **government** in such a way that the **sovereign power** does not answer to a higher authority.

The foundational political question of any society can be posed as such: In a **given state**, **who possesses sovereign power**?

The Church?

The King?

The Nobles?

The People themselves?

To put it another way, **where does sovereignty reside within a state**?

17. OK...in the context of a state, what is government?

The **government** is the vehicle through which the **sovereign power** carries out its desires for certain rules and actions, whether for good or ill.